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ABSTRACT

Many communication majors expect to do little written communication, since skill in oral communication is more developed if not preferred. Before a student writes or becomes engaged in the rational and logical process of evaluating writing, he or she is in the stage of clearing the mind for action. A non-rationalistic approach to writing seeks to clear the mind of "thinking." This approach is especially useful for public relations writing since many corporation chiefs complain that today's students are technicians and do not think. More and more evidence indicates that public relations professionals must be flexible writers who can produce a variety of formats ranging from pitch letters, public announcements, news releases, to newsletters. In class, students can perform simple relaxation exercises as their first activity. Another exercise, using a computer, has students fill a page with words without "thinking." This "brainstorming" stage allows the writers to relax, to stop judgment on their thoughts, and at the same time to produce a large body of material for editing. In the next step the students become editors. Sharpening editing skills can involve testing inspection skills. Writing is also a visual process, with similar principles applying to graphics as words and graphics as pictures. As an exercise students are instructed to draw lines (no pictures or symbols) indicating different emotions. Comparisons can then be made. These exercises have definite benefits in the production and evaluation of writing. (TD)

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WRITING: CLEARING THE MIND FOR ACTION

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WRITING: CLEARING THE MIND FOR ACTION

Three major observations influence my approach to teaching writing to communication students. Specifically communication students

1. select a communication major often expecting to do less written communication. Skill in oral communication is more developed if not preferred. Public relations is expected to be a specific application of oral communication. Writing newsreleases, annual reports, etc. does not seem to be weighed heavily with press conferences, public appearances, speaking before the media, or contacting the media. Some have fears toward writing. The demands of public relations writing, flexibility and variety in style, a somewhat different format than what is taught in English classes, adds further complexity. In instances where students are asked to write copy for more graphic-oriented pieces, the combination of graphics and writing is viewed as being more demanding of their skills. So public relations for a communication student can be more complex and demanding.

2. Communication students at a regional campus in this study were primarily commuter students with the average age of 27 years. This type of student population was going to school in addition to having a family and, in most cases, a part-time if not a full-time career. Students arrived in class often tired and exhausted with their minds still engaged in the problems of the day. The eager learner was often a student who collapsed into their seat for two hours of peace and quiet.

3. Another observation noted that the logic of information exchange did not always seem to be an effective approach. Not all students could organize ideas for effective communication by being led through written exercises or models. Something seemed to be missing. These observations seemed to be consistent across writing classes involving basic public relations writing assignments to broadcast writing and to writing more likely to be found with graphics (ad copy, newsletters, billboards, etc.).

Status of Writing in Texts

Having defined the problem, little material was found to help the student clear their mind for writing. Most texts, for example, are excellent in describing the elements necessary in producing the variety of writing required in public relations (Walsh, 1986; Newsom and Carrell, 1986; and Simon 1983). Generally these tasks cover research, writing principles (clarity and interest, simplifying the complex, and grammar, spelling and punctuation). The specific tasks focus on writing for general audiences (news releases, broadcast writing), ad copy, speeches and scripts, annual reports, newsletters, brochures, memos and letters, and reports and proposals.

There is also ample attention given to the writer as a persuader. The nature of persuasion (opinion formation, attitude

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formation, the nature of persuasion as in stimulus-response, cognitive, motivational, social, and personality elements) ultimately views persuasion as a special type of communication when applied to writing. (Note there are strong opinions held on whether public relations students should be taught persuasive writing especially in departments outside of communication).

Sometimes a model of communication is depicted as source, message, medium, audience, and effect. For this paper, the focus is on the source or the "you" as the writer. The writer in some texts tends to be summed up in somewhat cursory manner or treated as a "nuts and bolts" type, the task-oriented person. Yet more and more evidence indicates the public relations professionals must be flexible writers. A writer that can produce a variety of formats ranging from pitch letters, public service announcements, news releases, written copy for graphics, to newsletters. The formats vary and the variety of writing abilities varies even more (Commission, 1987).

An even more clear starting point in one text states, for example, that the source is like being "stuck with who you are or whom you work for". So this is where this paper begins. The following discussion focuses on the person as the source of the writing. The premise is you are not stuck with who you are or who you represent. Rather than listing the techniques of writing, this paper starts before the writer writes or before the writer becomes engaged in the rational and logical process of evaluating writing. The writer is in the stage of clearing the mind for action. The paper is really a prelude to texts and prepares the writer for a more creative approach to writing, less a craft and more an art.

The Creative Mode for Developing the Writer

Like "the word 'art' is muddied", writing, too, is laden with connotations (Edwards, 1986, xiii). Public relations writing is often presented as logical, rationale, and ordered. Starting at this point, however, does not work for everyone. So an alternative view of public relations writing more as seeing (visual) or listening (auditory) does not seem logical. To suggest that writing should be approached without "thinking", again, seems contrary.

Note other areas such as health communication are questioning the rational models applied to the field. The question is also extended to whether thinking is a linear process. It is not new to seek directions which better reflect intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. Therefore, the goal here is to clear the mind of "thinking". What is sought is a sense of "order, health, beauty, balance and quality of relationship" approaching in the writing process but without imposing "thinking". (Edwards, 1986, xiii)

In public relations a reason for approaching writing from a nonrationalistic model is reflected by the current complaints by key CEO's that today's students are technicians and do not think. In a national study of agencies, telephone interviews interview that writers have learned a craft in the United States, perhaps

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well, but are not really useful contributors unless they are transformed into thinkers. Europeans are trained to think first and pick up the craft later. (Neff and Brown, 1990, EEC).

Therefore, the following approaches are to assist the writer in becoming more creative and less mechanistic in their craft. The philosophy is that public relations writing should reflect the close relationship with visual aspects and the auditory element in writing. Writing should be viewed as multidimensional and prepare students for both print and broadcast media with the understanding of the special needs in advertising, marketing, and various publications (billboards, newsletters, brochures, etc).

There are several ways of approaching this state of being relaxed with an open mind. One fairly simple approach is easily established as the first activity in the class period.

The following exercise, for example, should begin as soon as the students are settled in the classroom.

1. The students are asked to close their eyes and focus on the tensions in their body. Once the tension is identified the student is to focus on that tension until the stress disappears. Usually by focusing on the tension, tension is dissipated. If tension remains, a student can deliberately create tension by tightening muscles and then relaxing quickly. The contrast between the contraction of muscles and the releasing of the contraction is often enough to relax the tensions in that part of the body. Eventually this process should take only a few minutes and the students should initiate this step immediately upon entering the room.

2. After the student has eased the tensions in their body, a mind clearing process is introduced. The student is asked to repeat the word "1" nonverbally for about 10 minutes. If other thoughts creep into their mind, the student is simply to go back to repeating the number "1". After 10 minutes it is up to the student to stop and ease out of the quiet by being quiet with their eyes closed. Again, the student is to note if there are any tensions and the initial relaxation exercises can be repeated. After a few minutes the student should open their eyes.

Students report being refreshed and relaxed. The writing assignment is either on the board or on their desks. After reading the assignment the students are moved into other exercises which emphasize "seeing" and "listening". These will be described in the paper presented on visualization. Another alternative method to visualization is described here instead.

Generating Writing; Delaying Criticism

Some of the philosophical assumptions in this approach were summarized in my earlier article on "Beyond Theory: Improving Public Relations Writing Through Computer Technology" which is found in the March 1990 issue of the Journal of the Illinois

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Speech and Theatre Association. These assumptions, as emphasized by Heidegger, Winograd and Flores, state:

1. Knowing will never be complete or logical
2. Applied knowledge is more fundamental than theory, therefore, one must go beyond a theoretical point-of-view
3. Our cognitive labeling is not the primary way we relate in the learning process.
4. Learning is cast in a social matrix and is not an unique property of the individual.

In my article outlining the above principles, the emphasis stresses that "one will not learn the ability to act from the 'knowledge of a hammer' but from 'your familiarity with hammering'" (Neff, "Beyond Theory"). Therefore, the stress was on the act of writing and not on learning "how to use the computer". In this sense the computer disappears to be considered only as a tool for the writer--not an end in itself.

But another aspect of the exercise is that the students are told not to "think" while writing but to simply fill up their page with words. If using the computer, the computer is treated as a tool like the pencil and, again, simply a means for recording the writer's words. The computer matches the speed of the mind and is a wonderful means for brainstorming since the keyboard responds to rapid touch. This "brainstorming" stage allows the writers to relax, to stop judgment on their thoughts, and at the same time produce a large body of material for editing. This is something like the process often employed by Ernest Hemingway with his editor. Hemingway would bring piles of paper to the editor and say succinctly--you will find "For Whom the Bell Tolls" on those pages. A good editor will shape the material and find the key ideas. So in the next step the students become editors. Sometimes exchanging papers and editing each others manuscripts. Sometimes it is easier to work on someone else's materials.

Another approach to sharpening editing skills is to test the student's inspection skills (the ability to see). Students often have never really inspected closely their writing. This attentiveness needs to be developed. For example count the f's in the following paragraph:

> The necessity of training farmhands for the first class farms in the fatherly handling of farm livestock is foremost in the minds of farm owners. Since the forefathers of the farm owners trained the farmhands for first class farms in the fatherly handling of farm livestock, the farm owners feel they should carry on with the family tradition of training farmhands of first class farms in the fatherly handling of farm livestock because they believe it is the basis of good fundamental farm management.

Total number of f's_____

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Finding the "f's" is training the eye which is as important as training the hand to move. Such ongoing exercises are like warmups for the writer and should be practiced daily and at least at the beginning of each class period. Eventually the exercises should build a connectiveness between seeing and the writing process.

Writing is a Visual Process

Sometimes the student believes writing is solely producing words. A public relations writer is more often then not faced with space and relationships with graphics other then type. However, even newspapers are becoming more and more graphic. Note the phenomenal success of U.S. Today. And the relationship between graphics and writing may be closer then one realizes. The following quote illustrates the bond between the two areas.

> Designer JOe Molloy views designing and writing as parallel strategies. In teaching graphic deign students, Molloy recommends applying the ideas expressed in the famous little book by Theodore Strunk and E.B. White, The Elements of Style, a guide used by countless writers since its first publication in 1935. Some of Strunk and White's rules for writers that Molloy applies to design are the following:
>
> > Omit needless words.
> > Place yourself in the background.
> > Revise and rewrite.
> > Do not overwrite.
> > Do not overstate.
> > Do not affect a breezy manner.
> > Be clear.
> > Write in a way that comes naturally.
> > Work from a suitable design.
> > Make sure the reader knows who is speaking.
> > (Edwards, p 130)

The above example serves to illustrate how similar principles apply to graphics as words and graphics as pictures.

Producing public relations publications for hospitals, for community groups, for corporate requires sensitivity into the impact of what is being presented. Students often are not in touch with what their work conveys to an audience. Getting the student to be more aware of their emotions and feelings behind an idea is important to how that idea may be presented. Here is an exercise which builds a student's dictionary of emotions.

Have the student fold a sheet of typing paper into eight sections by folding it in half, then in half again, then in half a third time. Number each space and title each space. Since the goal is to have the space convey an emotion, each space should have a label like joy, jealousy, anxiety, hopefulness,

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peacefulness, guilt, ecstasy, love, hatred, fear, etc. With just line drawings have each box reflect the title.

Use pencil for this exercise and there is no right or wrong. The restriction is you cannot draw a picture or use symbols. No hearts and flowers, no question marks, no rainbows just the language of line-- fast lines, slow lines, light, dark, smooth, rough broken or flowing whatever is best for you to express.

Comparing these line drawings one begins to see that there are similarities. Heavy dark lines are found in anger. Soft lines reflect peace. There is a sense of general agreement.

Words often may express what you want but designs or visuals may be worth a thousand words. Know when to use either or both to reinforce the message.

Benefits of Preparing the Mind for Action

Perhaps what is happening is an evolution towards a more visual use of words. Where journalism has a narrower concept of writing, communication disciplines may be more interested in integrating a more creative bent. By approaching the public relations writing courses (general, broadcasting, and graphics) as a creative act and less of a rational and logical process has many benefits, public relations may become less of a "craft" and challenge the writers to be more creative.

The exercises and suggestions for preparing the mind for action has definite benefits. Students will experience a new level of confidence before attempting the assignments. Specifically, these exercises are:

1. Preparing the mind for writing by establishing a transition period allows the day's burdens to be diminished.

2. Relaxing the person (removing tension) so one can work more productively.

3. Assisting the student in seeing the relationship in space and by hearing and seeing more fully more possibilities are opened up for the writer.

4. Leaning to not to "think" when preparing to write.

5. Editing or being critical much later or after the production of ideas and building more skill in "seeing" writing as a visual process.

6. Understanding there is a close relationship between graphics and writing and, in fact, some of the same principles may apply.

7. Connecting the link between graphics and writing to express more fully the commonality of symbols.

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